



Why outdoor play is key to kids' mental & physical health

No matter the weather, kids still need to get outside to move

Research shows that when children get outside for some fresh air, they move more and play longer — behaviours that directly link to improved cholesterol levels, blood pressure, body composition, bone density, as well as aspects of social and mental health.

With that in mind, we sat down with ParticipACTION's Exercise Scientist and Kids Health Researcher Dr. Leigh Vanderloo to shine a light on the importance of outdoor play when it comes to keeping kids healthy.



Q: Why, more than ever, is it important that kids spend time outdoors?

A: Due to COVID-19, many restrictions have been put in place to help control the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, this has resulted in a decrease in social connectivity among peers and sport participation. Outdoor active play is deemed a low-risk activity, so kids can take advantage of being outside at a safe distance with small groups of their friends and engage in some active play.

Q: Families are physically closer than before as we stay home to overcome the pandemic, placing more pressure on parents and caregivers. Does this make it more challenging to develop and maintain healthy habits at home?

A: Fortunately, parental support and engagement in physical activity are positively associated with their kids' healthy movement behaviours (physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep). The dramatic changes and restricted access to many sports and activities due to Covid-19 can be challenging for families, but they are also a great opportunity to redefine what family time can mean for kids. **How we move as a family has a direct impact on our kids. Here are four ways to become an active family:**

1. ***Be an active role model:*** Add physical activity to your daily routine and look for opportunities to be active as a family when possible.
2. ***Create a family media plan:*** Set limits around screen viewing, prioritize screen-free family time and use "device baskets" (bins for personal mobile devices)

3. **Encourage outdoor time:** Spending time outdoors as a family according to physical distancing guidance is an easy and effective way to increase physical activity, improve mental health, decrease sedentary behaviour and improve sleep quality.
4. **Make it fun:** Don't forget about fun! Take turns letting each member of the family choose the next activity. This will keep things varied, but also give each member an opportunity to share an activity that excites them.



Q: As we transition into the winter months, can you share some specific examples of activities families can do together?

A: Participating in physical activity together is a great way to encourage active behaviours in kids and carving out time for that now can result in physical and mental health benefits for the whole family. Here are some examples of how we can make family time “active time”. It's important to understand that **all movement is good movement**, so you don't need a lot of space or equipment to make every step count.

- Get some fresh air each day by going for a walk or trying one of these activities:
 - Walking, running, wheeling, cycling, hiking, snow shoeing, cross-country skiing, skating, snow shoveling, tobogganing
- Check out local dollar stores, community centres or outdoor skating rinks, sport equipment trade-in centres, Kijiji, local conservation areas/authorities (snowshoes) for access to free or low-price options for sports equipment
- You can make the most of indoor time by trying at-home workouts, family dance parties and Pilates or yoga

Even though the colder months are upon us, getting kids outside to play can still be a part of your daily routine – all you need is the right gear. As temperatures drop and hours of daylight dwindle, be sure to dress in layers, keep extremities covered and wear reflective clothing so you and your loved ones are easily visible.